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Begging as a Path to Progress. Indigenous Women and Children and the Struggle for Ecuador's Urban Spaces - by Swanson, Kate [Review of: K. Swanson (2010) Begging as a Path to Progress. Indigenous Women and Children and the Struggle for Ecuador's Urban Spaces - by Swanson, Kate]

Nencel, L.S.

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Book Reviews

Swanson, Kate (2010) *Begging as a Path to Progress. Indigenous Women and Children and the Struggle for Ecuador's Urban Spaces*, University of Georgia Press (Athens, GA), xiv + 146 pp. \$19.95 pbk.

This monograph in the series of 'Geographies of Justice and Social Transformation' aims to unravel myths concerning indigenous women and children, begging, and rural-to-urban migration. Swanson's study is a multi-sited research project situated in Calhuasí (a village located in the central Andean province of Tungurahua), Quito and Guayaquil in Ecuador. Positioning the activity of begging within the complexity of the globalising world, the author surprisingly shows how begging, often considered the last possible means for survival, is an activity undertaken that not only allows indigenous women and children to earn more than they would otherwise, but their earnings, in most cases are invested in the future. A substantial amount is used for school costs, material consumption or house improvements. In addition, while both in academia and non-governmental organisations a distinction is made between street children who are 'children *in* the streets' and 'children *of* the streets', this case study shows that the beggars of Calhuasí do not fit into either category, but are temporary migrants who come to the cities with their (extended) families during school recesses and other holidays, only to return to their daily lives in Calhuasí afterwards. Sticking together as a group, the children are strictly controlled and rarely left unsupervised. At night they return to their rented rooms and sleep there together. Thus, their experiences of begging is a far cry from the stereotypical image of the abandoned, delinquent, drug addicted street child who begs to survive or support his/her habits. The strength of Swanson's book is found in her portrayal of this particular group as migrants who beg for their future and how this in turn, questions stereotypes concerning street children and begging. This strength also reveals a weakness, namely that the book is not just about child beggars, but about child beggars involved in a constellation of relationships with family, relatives and the community who also migrate to beg. More space should be given to describe this group experience of migration.

Through the study of begging, Swanson gives insight into the tensions that are created in gender relations and also in the significance of childhood. While begging gives women more autonomy as well as earning power, simultaneously, in their communities shifts are taking place, transforming the 'two headed household' model to one less equitable. Likewise, the tension that exists between the Ecuadorian government's idea of childhood – based on the UN's convention on the rights of the child – and indigenous meanings of childhood is felt not only in the discourses that are produced about what it means to be a child but also how they are implemented by NGOs in their programmes, which generally consider begging to rob children and women of their dignity. Finally, the author shows how anti-begging rhetoric as well as city planning aimed at 'whitening' the streets, reinforce racist attitudes towards indigenous people and strengthen their marginalisation and stigmatisation.

Swanson prides herself of being one of the view academics that use a child-centred methodology to prioritise the voice of children. While her attempt is noble, the result is far from satisfactory. Although it is clear that she has collected a huge amount of data from her research with the children and their families, and she is committed to using her research to improve their situations, the book is written in a traditional academic genre that uses quotes and anecdotes to affirm the author's assertions and authority rather than construct the text around the children's voices.

Book Reviews

Another troublesome point is the representation of the village Calhuasí. On the one hand, the village is presented as being secluded and closed to outside influences until 1992, when a development worker initiated the building of a road that connected Calhuasí to larger towns and cities. With the construction of the road, the community drastically changed as their contact with the 'outside world' increased rapidly. The road facilitated their entrance into the market economy, and begging also became a feasible economic alternative. Swanson uses a static notion of culture in her description of the changes that took place, which unintentionally, but nevertheless creates a distinction between the modern – the 'outside world' – and the 'traditional' – the indigenous community. On the other hand, since the communities' insertion into the market economy, the author is more inclined to use globalisation theory, including ideas concerning 'conspicuous consumption' to try to understand the developments observed. This theoretical split is problematic and could be avoided if globalisation theories were used that offer the analytical possibility to study the relationship between the global and the local within a historical and cultural specific context.

Lorraine Nencel
VU University Amsterdam